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ABSTRACT

The result of both discussions and individual papers by members of the Intersegmental Committee on Writing Skills of the California Postsecondary Education Commission, this position paper proposes a possible, intersegmental solution to the problem of the inadequacy of student writing skills. After presenting background information on the problem, the paper states its position--that it is both desirable and possible to establish a statewide minimum standard for college level writing, which should be used as a prerequisite to freshman composition courses--and presents its rationale for this position. It then proposes possible solutions to three problems involved in establishing such a standard: setting an agreed-upon standard of writing proficiency, designing or selecting an examination for measuring student performance against the standard, and securing agreement about how and when to administer the examination. It concludes by discussing state responsibility for financing remedial programs for students who fail to meet the standard. Three statements outlining writing proficiency skills desirable for college entrants are attached. (GT)

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California Postsecondary
Education Commission

February 11, 1979

INTERSEGMENTAL COMMITTEE ON WRITING SKILLS: POSITION PAPER #1

Question

Can (or should) a statewide minimum standard for college-level writing be established? If so, should this standard exist as an admission criterion, as a prerequisite to Freshman Composition, or as a minimum competency level that must be achieved to pass Freshman Composition?

Background

According to the College Entrance Examination Board and the American College Testing Program, the test scores of high school students have been declining since the 1960s. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that the writing ability of both thirteen- and seventeen-year olds has declined consistently since 1969, when NAEP's testing program was begun. What appears to be a trend at the national level is also true of California's students as a group, both on the national tests and on the State's own examinations. Downward trends in reading test scores and in written expression at the twelfth-grade level have been particularly marked since 1969. Further evidence of the decline in writing skills is found in the low level of reading and writing skills of entering freshmen in California's public colleges and universities, a situation which has led to an increase in remedial English programs in these institutions.

There is sharp disagreement about the causes of the writing skills problem. College and university professors point to weaknesses in students' secondary school preparation. High school teachers blame the junior high and elementary school programs; elementary teachers argue that societal problems and lack of parental support produce an environment that is not conducive to the development of disciplined learning. Whatever the causes, the problem is clearly one shared by all segments of education, and the best solutions will be those that involve the cooperative efforts of all these segments.

Objective

The objective of this position paper is to propose a possible, intersegmental solution to the writing skills problem. The paper is the result of both discussions and individual papers produced by members of the Commission's Intersegmental Committee on Writing Skills. This Committee was established to provide a forum for

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representatives from every level and segment of education (K-12, the three public postsecondary segments, and the independent institutions), to discuss the writing skills problem and develop cooperative solutions. The Committee's membership includes systemwide administrative representatives from each educational segment, as well as practitioners/experts in the field of writing. Their hope is that this paper will be discussed by the segmental governing boards, and that an on-going process will be developed to implement the proposed intersegmental solution which follows.

Position

It is both desirable and possible to establish a statewide minimum standard for college-level writing. This minimum standard of proficiency should be used as a prerequisite to Freshman Composition. It should not be used as an admission standard for entrance into the college or university, nor as a statewide standard for successful completion of the Freshman Composition course.

Rationale

Virtually every college and university in California offers a college-level writing course that is acceptable for transfer to another institution. This course is often called Freshman Composition. It is intended to be a course in which the major elements of college-level expository writing are taught to incoming students to give them the appropriate skills needed to produce the essay and research papers which will be required of them in various classes.

However, with the growing numbers of students who are entering college without even the minimum skills in reading and writing, colleges have been forced to offer more and more courses in remedial English or "basic skills." In addition, without a prerequisite for Freshman Composition, many of these unprepared students find their way into college-level writing classes, forcing instructors to teach basic reading and writing skills (often at the most elementary level), rather than college-level composition. The frustration on all sides is easily imagined: those students who are not adequately prepared to benefit from the course struggle along hopelessly (rather than benefiting from a more appropriate basic skills class), while lowering the level of the course for those students who are ready to tackle college-level writing. The instructor must rework the original course to a more elementary level, and may be forced to deal with elementary writing skills which he or she has not been trained to teach. Thus the students suffer, the instructor suffers, and the integrity of Freshman Composition as a college-level, transferable

course in expository writing suffers.[1] Add to this the problem of a student who has passed a Freshman Composition course in one college, only to find upon transfer that the next-level course is far too difficult, since the original course was, in fact, remedial, and not college level. The need for a statewide, minimum standard of writing proficiency as a prerequisite for Freshman Composition becomes increasingly clear.

Testing/Feasibility

If the need for a statewide minimum standard for entrance into Freshman Composition is granted, three problems still remain: (1) establishing an agreed-upon standard of writing proficiency; (2) designing or selecting an examination for measuring student performance against the standard; and (3) securing agreement about how and when to administer the examination.

With regard to setting an agreed-upon standard of writing proficiency, considerable activity is currently underway in the public segments. The Joint Task Force on Writing Proficiencies--which includes representatives from the University of California, the State Department of Education, and the high schools, and is headed by Professor John Pippenger, Chairperson of the University's Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools--has established minimum performance objectives in writing skills required for study at the University. These performance objectives are the same as those which must be met by students to pass the Subject A examination or course. The English Council of California Two-Year Colleges

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1. There was some disagreement on the Intersegmental Committee on Writing Skills about the need for homogeneous grouping of students in composition courses; that is, grouping students by ability level. Dr. Ross Winterowd of the University of Southern California, who represents the independent colleges on the Committee and who has been doing research on the composition process and effective techniques for teaching writing, disagrees with the premise that grouping students by ability level is helpful in teaching composition. He states, "If a composition course is actually a composition course, teaching the process and skills of writing, then nothing is gained by homogeneous groupings; the more gifted and the less gifted work together and at their own paces to develop strategies and tactics that will get them from the first inkling of an idea through to the finished manuscript." Dr. Winterowd's own approach to the problem involves placing students in an open-ended writing program and giving them instruction and practice for as many semesters as necessary, until the students have demonstrated minimum or more than minimum proficiency.

(ECCTYC) has also adopted a statement on competency in basic writing skills. At least one campus of the California State University and Colleges' system (CSU, Long Beach) has, through its English Department Composition Committee, prepared a statement about "the skills in language and thinking that students should acquire if they are to function successfully in composition classes and other classes in college." (See Attachment for copies of each of these statements.)

Given this activity, it seems reasonable to expect that if representatives from each segment can be brought together to review the above proficiency statements and any others that may exist, a common standard of writing proficiency for the college level can be adopted by the three public segments.

The second problem involves the design of an instrument--some sort of test--to measure student performance against the agreed-upon standard and to assist in the proper placement of students. Testing for proper placement is essential, so that students do not repeat failure patterns by starting at too difficult a level or waste time in classes below their ability. It is important to state that placement tests are not barriers to access; they simply serve to assist students in making choices about which courses to take. Placement testing can also serve (if the test is properly constructed) as a diagnostic device to reveal areas of student weakness where help is needed. In order to achieve acceptable validity and reliability, a placement test of writing proficiency must be standardized. The test should be fair to all students no matter what their backgrounds and academic preparation. This means that all students should take the same test, that the test should be as free from cultural bias as possible, and that all tests should be graded according to the same criteria under controlled conditions.

If the premise that the test must be standardized is granted, the question of how and when it should be used can be addressed. For a variety of reasons, the Committee does not believe it is feasible to use test results as an admission criterion. Present evidence suggests that a test of reasonable difficulty (that is, one worth giving in the first place) would disqualify a large number of students from admission to college. Since many students with writing deficiencies who are now admitted to college do profit from remedial writing courses and bring their writing up to an acceptable standard, it can be argued that these students would be unfairly denied the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to do college-level work if the minimum writing standard were used as an admission criterion. In addition, if used as an admission criterion, the test could have an especially adverse impact on minority enrollments.

On the other hand, such a standardized writing test would be very useful as a prerequisite to Freshman Composition. The University has used such a prerequisite (the "Subject A" essay examination and

course) since 1898. The State University system is now using the newly developed English Placement Test (EPT) as both a diagnostic tool and as a placement examination. State University campuses that use the EPT as a prerequisite for Freshman Composition report that the course can be taught as a genuine collegiate course, while providing the special help that some students may need in other, more basic writing skills courses. Most Community Colleges have placement tests of their own for use in counseling students into appropriate writing courses.

The Committee has discussed the possible use of the English Placement Test as an appropriate examination for uniformly assessing the writing abilities of all students on a statewide basis. Two campuses of the University are using the EPT this year as an experimental supplement to their regular Subject A examinations, and several Community Colleges are testing the EPT as a placement tool for their students. If these experiments with the EPT prove successful, it may be feasible to move ahead with adoption of this test as a prerequisite placement test for all entering students in all segments. Whatever test is adopted, the three public segments would also have to agree on an appropriate cut-off score for entrance into Freshman Composition.

The question of when and at what level to administer such a writing placement examination is also under discussion. The previously mentioned Joint Task Force on Writing Proficiencies (UC, and the Department of Education) has recommended allowing high school juniors to take the Subject A examination, which the University currently administers to incoming freshmen. Those who pass the test, thus exhibiting mastery of the composition skills necessary for satisfactory performance in Freshman Composition courses above the level of Subject A, would be exempted from the fourth year of high school English currently required for admission to the University. There has also been discussion of allowing high school juniors to take the State University's English Placement Test. It obviously would be helpful to have one writing placement test which high school juniors could take to satisfy the writing placement testing needs of all three public segments.

The wisdom behind administering the current college-level writing placement tests to high school juniors lies in the use of the tests as "early warning" devices: students interested in attending college will be able to ascertain early whether or not they have the writing skills necessary for success in college-level composition classes. If students find they lack the requisite skills, the necessary remedial courses can be taken in the senior year of high school, rather than in college. Considerable financial savings would accrue to the State with this arrangement, since teaching remedial writing courses at the high school level is less expensive and more practical than teaching such courses in college. It is

also more appropriate that the majority of the remedial work be done in the K-12 segment, and not in the colleges and universities. However, since numbers of students decide after leaving or graduating from high school to attend college, the placement test and some form of remediation would still have to be available to incoming students, especially at the Community Colleges.

Financing/State Responsibility

If a statewide minimum standard for college-level writing is established, and an appropriate placement test decided upon, both the institutions and the State must be ready to deal with the consequences. If the placement test continues to be given to the incoming freshmen, provision must be made to offer remedial courses in writing to those students who do not qualify for Freshman Composition. The issue then becomes the extent to which campuses are willing and financially able to establish suitable remedial programs. In the State University, every campus has indicated a need for additional resources to supply adequate remediation to those students who fall below the cut-off scores on the EPT. The Legislature, up to this time, has not been willing to provide the total funding necessary for such remediation, forcing some campuses to lower the cut-off scores on the EPT in order to limit the number of students in remedial courses. Clearly, this is not an appropriate solution.

If the segments can cooperate in establishing a reasonable level of writing proficiency as a prerequisite for Freshman Composition, and can reach agreement on a statewide placement examination and appropriate cut-off scores, then the Legislature must do its part by appropriating the funds necessary to supply remediation in writing skills to students who require it. Consideration should also be given to allowing high school juniors to take the statewide writing placement examination, thus providing the majority of the necessary remediation at the high school level. Such a cooperative solution is without doubt an ambitious undertaking, but the possibility of its accomplishment is real.

The Intersegmental Committee on Writing Skills urges the segmental governing boards, the Statutory Advisory Committee of the Commission, and the Commission itself, to give serious consideration to this proposal and to move forward with its implementation.

ATTACHMENT

Writing Proficiency Statements

English Council of California Two Year Colleges (ECCTYC): Competency in Basic Writing Skills

By the time students finish high school, they should have had experience with as much writing as possible:

of different kinds (e.g. letters, dialogues, stories, journals, essays, reports, editorials)

for different audiences (self, peers, teachers, the world at large)

using appropriate levels of language (from conversational to formal)

When students are ready to enter English 1A and other college courses, they should be able to:

follow or argue a thought in an organized fashion

with sufficient explanation

moving between specific and general, concrete and abstract

in acceptable English,

so that what they are saying can be understood by a reader who does not necessarily share the writer's assumptions or experiences.

ECCTYC Committee on Writing:

- Marlene Griffith, Chair, Laney College
- Dick Lundquist, Cabrillo College
- Jim Cagnacci, San Francisco City College
- Joe Fitschen, Lassen College
- Jim Quay, University of California, Berkeley

October 27, 1978

Joint Task Force on Writing Proficiencies: Standards and Objectives
(University of California/State Department of Education)

The minimum performance objectives should be:

a. an understanding of the assigned topic;

b. the selection of a pertinent main idea and the appropriate development of that idea through argument and example;

c. control of diction (word choice aptly and precisely expresses the writer's meaning);

d. effective sentence construction (the sentences economically and successfully convey the writer's ideas and display a suitable variety of structures);

e. command of the conventions of standard written English (relative freedom from such errors as fragments, run-together sentences, faulty agreement, and improper pronoun reference);

f. command of mechanics (capitalization, spelling and punctuation).

We envision that the students who on the basis of their performance on this test are excused from the fourth year of English will be those who have already mastered the composition skills requisite for satisfactory performance in freshman English composition courses above the level of Subject A.

We believe that these skills cannot be measured adequately solely by an objective test of editing or reasoning skills. We therefore recommend that a major component of such a test be complete expository essays graded with the highest practicable reliability.

These tests should be scored by competently supervised teachers from both secondary and postsecondary institutions. This procedure should resemble the scoring of CEEB advanced placement tests.

We recommend that, if possible, this test be used to replace one or more examinations currently required of students. We hope that the test also would be used by the CSUC and other institutions.

April 21, 1978

Expectations of Writing Skills

at CSU, Long Beach

For the benefit of high schools in the area who wish to prepare their students for possible matriculation at California State University, Long Beach, the English Department through its Composition Committee has prepared the following statement about the skills in language and thinking that students should acquire if they are to function successfully in composition classes and other classes in college. The skills set forth are fundamental, and any native speaker of English who has normal learning capacities should be able to master the skills in the public schools. The more of them an entering student has, the better.

THE WHOLE DISCOURSE

The student should be able to produce an independent, self-contained, thoughtful piece of writing on a topic of consequence to the writer and/or the potential reader. The essay (this term is used for convenience only; other forms of writing are equally valid) should progress and develop, not just repeat the central idea in various ways, and should be of sufficient magnitude, probably several paragraphs, to make an impact. It should have discernible parts and should make clear the relationship of those parts to one another and to the purpose or intention of the whole essay. It should be above all a clear and orderly communication of its content to an audience.

THE PARAGRAPH

The paragraphs within the essay should be appropriate to their function: introductory, developing, transitional, concluding. Developing paragraphs should build through inclusion of specific substance, not just repetition. Each should deal with only one topic, and each should relate to the others. The relationship of sentences within the paragraph should be clear. Each paragraph should be full enough to make a contribution to the paper as a whole.

THE SENTENCE

The sentences within paragraphs should be "correct" in grammar and usage. (An acceptable standard of correctness is Standard Written English, the sort of prose found in most newspapers, magazines, textbooks, and government publications and heard on radio and television.) Students should be able to reflect the complexities of their thoughts and perceptions by such complexities of sentence formation as coordination, embedding, reduction, use of various phrases, and variable placement of modifiers. All sentences should be clear, direct, and appropriately economical.

THE CHOICE OF WORDS

Students should be able to choose semantically compatible words. The language used in forming sentences should be precise in relation to other substance and appropriate in level of usage to the expected audience. Students should be aware of both the denotations and any connotations of words. They should have working vocabularies sufficiently extensive so that they can use the exact word called for and not a general word.

THE USE OF MECHANICS

Students should know standard manuscript form, including indentation of paragraphs and provision of adequate margins. They should know how to punctuate their sentences conventionally and which words in a sentence to capitalize. They should be able to spell correctly at least all of the commonly used words and should be able to distinguish between homonyms.

READING AND WRITING

The ability to write with ease and clarity is closely allied to the ability to read the prose of others; reading and writing are interdependent skills. Therefore, students should know how to derive the intended meaning from prose by decoding words in sentences and determining how they work together.

RHETORICAL MODES

Students entering college should have had considerable experience in narrative writing, in which control over the strategies of chronological arrangement is important, and in descriptive writing, in which observation and the strategies of spatial arrangement are important. They should have some acquaintance with expository and argumentative writing. However, a wide range of reading and writing experiences of various kinds, with a consequent understanding of how language can be made to do a writer's bidding, is more important than detailed knowledge about any one or several rhetorical modes. Frequent opportunities to write and to discuss the process and product of that writing are essential to the mastery of writing skills.

Most of the students who enter CSULB as freshmen have some of the skills mentioned above. Few have them all, and some have very few. Perhaps we are hoping for too much, but we believe that young people in their teens can learn all of these skills and we hope that more and more of them will come to us with sound basic preparation in writing so that they may perform at their maximum level when they enter college classes.